

## Shortgrass Country

Back in the 50's the Boss and his hunting companions set up a camp on a ranch south of Marfa, Texas. Big mule deer ranged in huge numbers; guests accustomed to other ranges developed hot cases of buck fever and often filled their limits way too soon.

Along in the 60's, I visited the outfit on a winter hunt and a later summer social visit. Coyotes were killing so bad that by July of that year, the foreman was frantic to ship the lambs and liquidate the flock. Hundreds of buzzards glided over the canyons of this excellent sheep country. The Republic of Mexico and Big Bend National Park were raising coyotes faster than the ewes could raise lambs to feed them.

After that, I understand, the outfit turned to straight cattle and took in the nucleus of the Boss's old hunting club for deer season. The foreman made the steer roping in San Angelo, but asking about predatory losses was not, and is not, considered polite conversation in the grandstands of a big roping.

In January, news came that deer were becoming hard to hunt in that area. One of Boss's old friends said the hunting was mighty tough because panthers ranging across the Rio Grande and off the park's grounds had decimated the deer population.

The foreman's son, who lives in Mertzon, confirmed the report. He was raised on the ranch. He said on his last visit, where he'd once seen herds of does grazing off the road, he saw one or two deer.

Such news sure changes the picture up here in the shortgrass country. The ones of us dreading giving up sheep herding and living off a few cows have counted on some income from lease hunting. The effects of the Big Bend Park's husbandry spreads out in all directions; unless we are going to share in the Service's ticket revenue, we may end up becoming the modern-day lost tribe of the tobasa grass flat lands.

Part of the redcap's enthusiasm can be satisfied shooting signs, but activity has declined so much in the shortgrass country that few outfits bother to advertise, except on the interstates. There, federal laws require signs to be a certain distance off the highway, making them a fine target to sight in rifles, or just to limber up the ole trigger finger.

I wish I could find a service to sell school districts. A sideline, say, of providing sheep skins to make seat covers for the buses and vans to transport football players and coaches; or maybe a decorating business paneling administrative offices in dark mesquite wood and upholstering the school board room in tanned calf hides.

Supplying tennis courts is another rich field of opportunity. Lots of rackets are bound to dry up and have to be restrung in our climate. I know by experience the high winds in March and April blow off plenty of balls and throw a big amount of slack in the nets and backdrops.

We have learned to steer clear of what mountain lions and prairie wolves and golden eagles like to eat, or use for denning and nesting materials.

Anticipating what schools are going to spend is difficult, as broad and active as their budgets are, I think as long as we don't take a wild flyer on classroom or library supplies, they are the customer of the future.